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House of Representatives

JUSTIN BAILEY VETERANS SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS PREVENTION AND TREATMENT ACT OF 2008

HON. BOB FILNER

OF CALIFORNIA
IN THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, this bill is named after Justin Bailey, who was a veteran of the Iraq War who died in a domiciliary facility of the Department of Veterans Affairs while receiving care for PTSD and a substance use disorder, a very tragic story but one that seems to be becoming all too familiar.

We have seen in recent weeks internal communications between members of the VA staff who we rely on to treat soldiers like Justin Bailey who seem to not take the symptoms of PTSD or suicide very seriously. They try to manipulate the data so we don't know all the facts. They try to get cheaper treatment if a diagnosis other than PTSD is made, and we are not serving our veterans when this occurs. We must not take lightly the commitment of servicemembers like Justin Bailey who choose to defend the country and freedoms that we enjoy.

We know the problems that veterans who have served in past wars face. We know about post-traumatic stress disorder. We know about the high reported incidence of substance abuse, and that it is what we call a common comorbidity to mental health issues. And we, of course, unfortunately know about the high rate of homelessness.

We know about these issues because we have seen entire generations of veterans tackle these problems, many without proper support from the VA and many who find themselves on the streets homeless or we see in statistics on suicide.

We must commit ourselves that whatever is necessary to prevent the newest generation of veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq will be done so they do not experience these same devastating issues.

There is growing concern about the reported effects of combat deployments on Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom servicemembers. The suicide rates are on the rise back to where they were in our Vietnam era.

We know the rate of post-traumatic stress disorder among these veterans has been estimated at about a third. I think if you include hidden symptoms of traumatic brain injury we're up to probably double that or more.

We know that the rate of homelessness amongst this group is growing. The same cycles that we saw with Vietnam are repeating themselves.

We cannot as a Congress, as a Nation allow this to happen again. We must reinforce our commitment to take care of those who have served. This is a cost of war. We're spending \$1 billion, Madam Speaker, on the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars every two days, \$1 billion every 2 days. Shouldn't our servicemembers get all the treatment they need? We have the money. It's a question of our will and our priorities.

So I urge you to support H.R. 5554. We would improve and expand the VA health care services available for veterans for substance use disorders, and require that all VA medical centers provide access to the full continuum of care for these disorders.

We also want to make sure that the Secretary reaches out to our OIF/OEF veterans with substance abuse disorders, and make sure that the funding is in place for the full continuum of care no matter where a veteran lives.

We also ask for a complete report on the services furnished by the Department in the last fiscal year, and have a 2-year pilot program on providing assessment, education and treatment via the Internet to veterans with substance use disorders. And finally, we would require the VA to conduct a review and report on the residential mental health facilities within the system.

I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 5554. We will hear from Congressman Michaud from Maine, the chairman of our Health Subcommittee, who wrote this bill. And he will have a chance to really explain it better after we hear from our ranking member.

Mr. FILNER. Madam Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the author of the bill and the Chair of our Health Subcommittee of the Veterans' Committee in the Congress, the gentleman from Maine (Mr. Michaud).

Mr. FILNER. Madam Speaker, I yield 5 minutes to a very active, aggressive member of our committee, who is always there when we need her, the gentlelady from Nevada (Ms. Berkley).

Ms. BERKLEY. Madam Speaker, I also would like to thank the chairman of our full committee, Mr. Filner, for being so supportive, and the chairman of our subcommittee, Mr. Michaud, for helping to make this legislation a reality today. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to be part of this important piece of legislation.

Mr. FILNER. I want to thank the gentlelady from Nevada for putting a real face to this problem. I know it means a lot to the family, but it means a lot to all of us. So thank you.

Another great member of our committee, Mr. Rodriguez from Texas, dealt with mental health issues in his previous life, and I will yield to him as much time as he might consume.

Mr. FILNER. Thank you, Mr. *Rodriguez*, for your expertise.